

"EVANGELISM AND GOD'S POWER"

(Acts 14:8-20)

(Thomas R. Schreiner)

At Southern Seminary we celebrate the truth that salvation is of the Lord. He is the one who makes his light shine in our darkness so that we see "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). When Lydia embraced the gospel, the "Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message" (Acts 16:14). When we teach and speak to those who oppose our message, we do so "in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim 2:24). We preach the gospel with confidence and boldness because we know that Christ has purchased some "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev 5:9). We have God's promise that his word "will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isa 55:11). No evangelist or missionary ever saves anyone, for salvation is always and only of the Lord.

Some people draw an erroneous conclusion from the truth that God alone saves. They conclude that if salvation is of the Lord, then we are absolved of all responsibility. They reason as follows, "If the Lord does all the work, then I don't need to do anything." This line of thought must be emphatically rejected, for nothing is clearer in scripture than our responsibility to preach the gospel to all people, in all places, and at all times. The great commission text in Matthew makes this clear, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19-20). The text does not say that we should preach the gospel to some nations. Jesus does not command us to proclaim the gospel only to those of our own culture. The command is not that we should limit the good news to those who share the same racial background. The injunction is clear. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we must proclaim the gospel to all peoples, in all places, and in all circumstances. The mandate to preach the gospel to all is a matter of life and death, for the New Testament makes it clear that salvation only comes through conscious faith in Jesus Christ. As Peter says, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12; cf. Rom 10:14-17).

The New Testament is also instructive as to how we preach the gospel. What message do we bring when we announce the good news to all? We declare the good news that Christ



died for our sins and was raised from the dead (1 Cor 15:3-4). Much more, of course, could be said about the content of what we preach. I want to focus, however, on how we call for a response from our hearers. If salvation is of the Lord, we might think that we should speak to our hearers as follows. "Consider now whether God has chosen you." "Go to your room and pray about whether you are the elect." Such preaching would be a disastrous mistake. The scriptures never encourage us to preach in such a way to unbelievers. The apostles did not drive people to introspection. They urgently summoned them to action, to respond to the good news. The apostolic pattern is evident from the book of Acts. In his Pentecost sermon Peter urges his hearers, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). In Acts 3:19 he says, "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord." Peter fearlessly declares to the religious leaders that the Holy Spirit is only given to those who obey God (Acts 5:32). When the Philippian jailer asks what he must do to be saved, Paul replies, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household" (Acts 16:31). Our proclamation of the gospel should follow the paradigm set by the apostles. We summon all to repentance and faith when the gospel is proclaimed.

Some people object that what we are arguing for here is contradictory. They wonder how we can say that salvation is of the Lord and at the same time say that we must preach the gospel to all peoples. There is not space here to reply fully to such an objection, but we may mention two things briefly. First, it must be remembered that God has appointed both the end and the means to attain the end. God has ordained that the preaching of the gospel is the means by which he will save his people. Second, as those who believe in the authority of the scriptures, we must preserve the balance taught by the scriptures themselves. We must never appeal to divine sovereignty to cancel out the clear mandate to preach the gospel to all, nor should we appeal to the necessity to believe and repent to deny God's sovereign grace. If we cannot explain satisfactorily how both divine sovereignty and human responsibility fit together, it is far better to let the scriptures speak than it is to limit them to our finite human understanding. It is far better to admit that some truths in the scriptures exceed our rational capabilities than it is to deny or downplay either divine sovereignty or human responsibility.